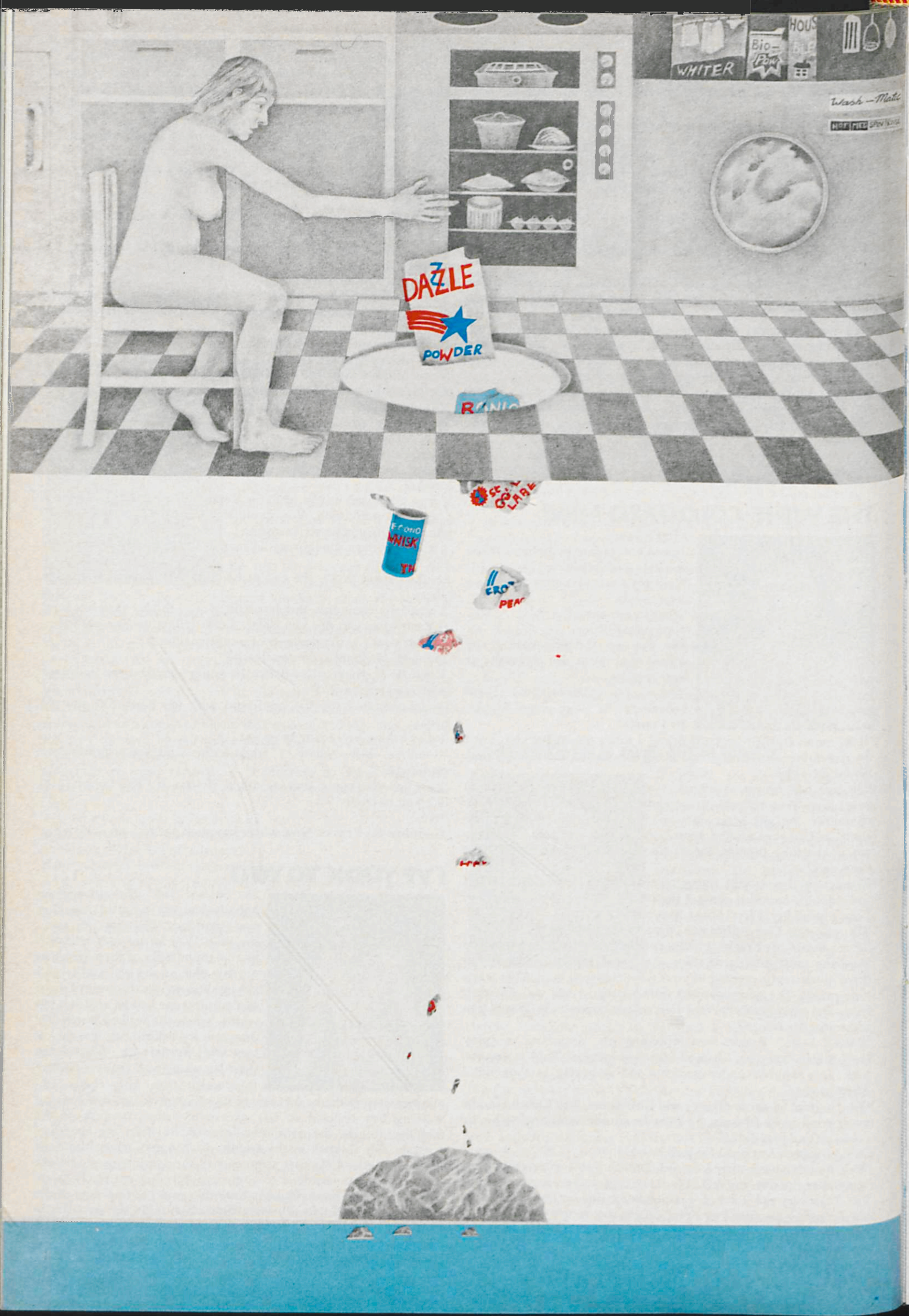
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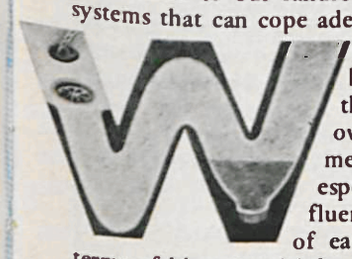
THE HOUSEWIFE'S WASTELAND

Pat Barr is a member of Women in Media. She is the author of three popular histories and a biography set in the nineteenth century Far East. She is also a contributing editor of Nova. Here, she begins her series on the environment for Spare Rib and says why ecology is an issue in which women play a vital role.

Illustrations by Christine McCauley

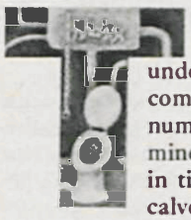
The environment is a large, technical, controversial, complicated subject; it is also trendy and has already launched a bandwagon of pundits, experts, well-meaning enthusiasts who, if they've done nothing else, have certainly succeeded in raising the level of public consciousness—perhaps over-raised it, for terms like 'ecology' and 'pollution' are in danger of becoming yawn-words. Yes, we know, we have been told, and what does the 'little woman' do when faced with doomwatchers' murmurings about the imminence of global catastrophe? In fact, one of the heartening features of this growth of active concern about a wide range of environmental issues is that anyone (that presumably sexless 'one' whom the majority nevertheless assume to be masculine) can make an effective contribution. By and large, the structures for participation, protest, action are already set up; practically every aspect of the question has its national organisation gunning for it and most towns have local off-shoots and pressure groups dedicated to particular local causes. There is still room for considerable improvement and innovation of course, for the groups vary tremendously in their levels of awareness and effectiveness; some are actively trying to spread the gospel of national population control or organise large-scale reclamation of derelict land, others feel they've done their bit by getting the rubbish cleared from the village pond. It all helps.

Women, as committed, interested, full-time members of society, can simply join in all this how and where they like; women in their traditional role of Wife-and-Mother also have special responsibilities and opportunities for making their views known. First and foremost, any woman who has developed the rudiments of an environmental consciousness will not have more than two children; if she wants more she will adopt them. To support this assertion one does not have to take sides in the present debate about how much the deteriorating quality of our environment (both nationally and globally) is due to simple over-population, how much to our failure to construct technological and social systems that can cope adequately with the populations we have.



Whichever way we look at it, and if we limit our sights to Britain, the facts are that we live in one of the world's most overcrowded countries, that more people mean more pollution and that this is especially so in highly industrialised affluent societies like ours where the impact of each individual on the environment—in terms of his potential for soiling, spoiling, using up—is far greater than in the under-developed world. It is, in consequence, essential that our children should early be made aware of their environmental responsibilities, from the basics of clearing up their own litter to the abstract concepts of conservation and the proper use of resources—abstractions that can easily be given a practical base-line by introducing them to, for example, the recent endeavours to protect endangered animal species or to preserve our national parks from the incursions of the extractive mining industries.

Planned restraint is a key term for the conservationist and is equally appropriate for the housewife-consumer—that 'feminine' role into which all the ad-men and fashion-mongers would like us to permanently and happily slot. Every consumer decision we make (and women do make most of them) has some sort of impact on our environment and thus the conscious exercise of environmental discrimination is a healthy habit. It implants a certain resistance against unnecessary over-consumption and an understanding of the processes that are involved in the production of the goods we buy. Naturally commercial pressures are continually aimed at undermining this resistance and awareness, but the facts are that some goods do have a higher degree of built-in disposability and obsolescence than others, that there are ways of cutting down the amount of rubbish we create in our daily lives, that some products are more ecologically damaging than others. Consider these points first for example: non-coated paper is more readily disposable than p.v.c., coated paper, plastic or aluminium foil; forty-three percent of the cost of a can of beer is the price of the can; goods bought in bulk have a much lower percentage of packaging material per item than goods bought individually; some beverages are sold in returnable bottles, some are not.



The business of finding out which products are made of, or contain, the highest proportion of undesirable, even harmful, ingredients is more complex—it's the jam we have to assess, not the number of labels on the jar. So the whole matter is a minefield of recurrent scares (the mercury content in tinned tuna fish), scandals (intensive breeding of calves and battery farming), uncertainties (how dangerous *are* colouring additives in food and cyclamates?), trade secrets (the actual amount of whale by-products and ingredients from other rare animals used in the manufacture of cosmetics), and controversies (what *is* the exact combination of elements in detergents that increase their capacity for polluting our rivers?). Nevertheless, there are certain guide-lines that can hardly be disputed, for they are really a matter of commonsense: buy as much fresh food as possible, especially fruit and vegetables; cut down on the sheer quantity of detergent you use (we invariably use more than is necessary); find out from the many sources of environmental information available what alternative products are recommended—you might find many of them preferable and cheaper anyway.

I'll be returning to the subject of reasonable alternative products later on. I hope also to suggest some specific ways in which people can follow through their own particular environmental enthusiasms, to analyse in more detail some of the present controversial environmental issues and to describe some of the projects and campaigns that the environmentalists are currently engaged in. To be going on with, here are some of the organisations you can contact for information and advice. Remember that these groups, especially the recently formed ones, are very short of manpower and money. So send an s.a.e. at least and if you can offer voluntary help, do so.

The Conservation Society, 21, Hanwyard's Lane, Cuffley, Potters Bar, Herts. — (Promotes population stabilisation and a more responsible use of technology).

Population and Stabilisation, 18, Bridstow Place, London W.2. — (Recently formed, using new techniques of persuasion and research to make its points).

Friends of the Earth, 9, Poland Street, London W1V 3DG. — (Aggressive action campaigns aimed at certain specific targets such as Mining in Snowdonia, the excesses of the packaging industry).

World Wildlife Fund, 7, Plumtree Court, London E.C.4. — (Dedicated to saving threatened wildlife throughout the world.)

British Conservation Corps Zoological Gardens, Regent's Park, London N.W.1. — (Various tidy-up campaigns, involves youth). ✸

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